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Introduction: towards dynamic comparative analysis

- 1 Comparison is at the heart of social sciences, and the study of ‘other’ culinary cultures is as old as the study of food practices – as a privileged and enduring object of anthropology. More recently, the cross-national comparison of food habits has received a new impulse from other quarters, as the association of eating habits with public health issues has come under scrutiny. Whereas the former had fostered studies of eating practices and their meaning within an overall social organisation, the latter has spurred cross-national surveys for the monitoring of specific and largely decontextualised habits understood as problematic or desirable from a health point of view (e.g. the Eurobarometers). A number of studies have flourished in-between these two opposite poles, investigating the link between ‘food, health and identity’ (Caplan 1997, Fischler and Masson 2008). Yet throughout this very diverse corpus, strictly comparative studies have been few. Instead, juxtaposed monographs of specific cultures, groups, or places, with an overseeing introduction prevail (e.g. special issue of *Anthropology of Food* on migration and food, edited by Chantal Crenn, Jean-Pierre Hassoun and François-Xavier Medina; special issue of *Techniques et cultures* on ‘Dynamique des pratiques alimentaires’ in 1998, edited by Martine Garrigues-Cresswell and Marie-Alexandrine Martin). And indeed this may be a reasonable approach, as cross-national comparison necessarily curtails the richness and depth of individual cases. Above all, cross-national comparisons stand at risk of reifying their object into sets of characteristics without a temporal dimension. This criticism is not new (Bastide 1996 [1970], Goody 1982), but it seems to be more widely appreciated in current cross-national inquiry. Thus recent studies have sought to recognize the dynamics of change always at play in the configurations of eating practices, as well as the formation and existence of cross-national spaces (e.g. migrant ‘communities’ spanning across borders through various kinds of exchanges). Indeed, investigations of food and migration have been particularly prone to reflect on comparative approaches (e.g. Crenn et al. 2010; Bricas and Calandre 2010).
- 2 This special issue of *AoFood* is the outcome of two seminars held at the Helsinki Collegium of Advanced Studies in May 2012, and at the University of Manchester in June 2013¹ with the aim of fostering exchanges between researchers, mostly sociologists and anthropologists, currently engaged in comparative work on food, in order to discuss some of the above mentioned challenges.
- 3 The contributions bear on various key notions of social studies of food starting with the notion of the meal itself, commensality, eating out, provisioning and meal preparation, and diets. Scales of enquiry are diverse, from the cross-national comparison of trajectories of economic change to the experience of migration or intra-couple negotiation of eating habits. However those micro-scale studies seek to find ways of harnessing specific situations to cast light on wider configurations whilst problematizing that link and the very configurations themselves. Enquiries with a more macro scope nevertheless also refer to specific practices.
- 4 Important for this special issue has been the interrogation of the ways in which comparisons seek to both objectivise and avoid the reification of their objects – an interrogation which is not specific to comparative social science, but which comparisons may both heighten and assuage. In what follows we highlight some of the ways in which we think the papers gathered here contribute to such an agenda: moving beyond a dichotomy between convergence and divergence to explore adjustments between different logics of change; focusing on relationships, patterns, logics or configurations, rather than on ensembles of characteristics or coherent entities; conveying dynamism to the study of variations, including through the use of ‘frontier’ objects and subjects; and finally contributing to the deconstruction of governmentalized categories, such as the family meal, and/or to broader theoretical endeavours.

Approaches to comparison – beyond the convergence/divergence dichotomy?

- 5 Cross-national comparisons of social arrangements and practices have tended to be guided by an interest in the shared and the specific, ‘convergence’ and enduring difference, predicated on the varying institutional organization of practices (typically, for European social research, on different welfare regimes), and on varying normative orders (for a recent concise overview of approaches of economic historians to convergence and divergence, and how these apply in the domain of food, see Scholliers 2012). An impression can thus be created of a tension between forces of globalization and institutional inertia or resistance, depending on the lens taken. Globalization is associated with forces of change, with the market and commodification, whilst the normative and institutional framework preserves and entrenches norms, representations, conventions and routines. This dichotomy between forces of change and structures of inertia can lead us to forget that current norms, conventions and institutions are themselves the product of the settlement of tensions between different directions of change, and that these settlements might vary significantly between groups and over time.
- 6 On the other hand, cross-national comparisons can tend to construct their objects as distinct ‘systems’ or ‘worlds’, configured by an inner logic and structure, a form of construction whose elegance and economy can be intellectually (and almost aesthetically) very pleasing. A fruitful example is Bildtgard’s analysis of French representations of ‘eating well’ in terms of ‘domestic world’ (Bildtgard 2010). Nevertheless such endeavours have been criticised for underplaying internal differentiation and changes over time as well as global trends. Calls for caution are salutary (for instance to resist the idea of ‘food cultures’, James 1997), but may fail to recognise that most social scientists do not equate any construction of a whole with reality but rather proceed ideal-typically. However it is true that ideal-typical constructions tend to leave the contradictions unexplained, the mere residues of the haphazard life of types.
- 7 In between these two strands of comparative approaches, and cutting across them, are studies which seek to formalise systems, patterns and practices, emphasising their articulation through a particular logic while also allowing to a certain extent for analyses of differentiation and evolution over time. One way to proceed is to refer to relationships between elements comprising the ‘entities’ and their mutual adjustments over time. Mark Harvey’s economic configurations of semi-autonomous elements epitomizes this approach and is a way to appreciate why and how change occurs. Not all elements evolve according to one and the same logic and their mutual interaction generates specific formations. By contrast, ‘eating systems’, as per the notion developed by Mäkelä et al. in 1999 and used by Nina Kahma and colleagues in this collection, always consist of three elements (eating patterns, meal formats and the social organisation of eating): comparisons over time and between countries unravel different relations between these elements, within stable formations.
- 8 An alternative way is to think about fields of contradictory forces. Food-related practices are underpinned by customary, conventional and institutional arrangements but they are also constantly shaped by various and diffuse demands: perhaps most notably regarding health, appearance and care, but also enjoyment (what Žizek, after Lacan, calls the injunction to enjoy – see Žizek 1997). Configurations of food and eating can thus be understood as the different ways in which possibilities are shaped for eaters to cope with similar demands placed on food.

Comparisons: between dynamism and variation

- 9 How can variations in eating and provisioning arrangements be analysed in more dynamic ways than term to term comparison? A first way to convey movement is, very broadly speaking, through time, and various papers in this special issue reflect on temporalities of very different kinds: historical – either diachronic or genealogical, or over the lifecourse. Thus Nina Kahma and her colleagues study the ‘complexity’ of meals in four Nordic countries on the basis of a prior study (2001) and using similar categories. Beyond the documentation of shifts over time, Mark Harvey’s strategy is to compare trajectories of change in relation to water consumption for example, so the object of study is processes of change in different contexts. Conversely, Anne Lhuissier takes a genealogical approach to the categories used to record

eating out in the UK and France, thus unravelling logics of construction rather than concurring trajectories. In Lhuissier's approach comparison and genealogy mutually feed each other to illuminate both from within and from without the delineation of the contours of the eating out category. Finally Giada Danesi studies commensality for a particular age group whilst raising the question of its influence and echoes in other age groups.

10 Various papers are concerned with what could be called 'frontier' objects or groups, i.e. practices and carriers which both depend on boundaries between domains and spaces (between the home and outside the home, between countries) and bridge them: their ways of enacting and bridging separation are particularly relevant objects to compare, as shifting lines of demarcation and separation are crucial to the understanding of eating arrangements and systems.

11 A first example is that of the way in which ready prepared food reorganises the work of meal preparation and shifts the boundaries between the part of the work done in the home and that delegated 'outside'. Thus ready prepared food could be seen, in principle, as a significant indicator of the extent of commodification of food in different countries. Yet Miriam Glucksmann's paper on food preparation work in Taiwan and the UK shows that ready prepared food is consumed outside of the home in Taiwan whilst it has not challenged home meals in the UK, quite the reverse. Focusing on what could be called a frontier practice thus enables Glucksmann to sketch out the food consumption-work 'profiles' of the UK and Taiwan. More specifically, she charts the shifts in relation to four components of consumption work (daily routines associated with food preparation consumption and disposal, acquiring maintaining and using equipment, acquiring competences, and coordination). This highlights very different possible trajectories of 'commoditisation' whose relation to food cultures is not straightforward. It problematises what counts as work and also suggests new directions for examining the interplay between provisioning systems and consumption work and national variations.

12 At a different level, Anne Lhuissier's exploratory study of the category of 'eating out' in French and UK food consumption surveys delineates the shifting contours of this category and its progressive evolution. This, again, is a frontier category which demands decisions as to what is included: for example, is food brought from home to the workplace 'eating out' or not? Different relationships between government activities (statistical recording) and the everyday mundane practice of eating out thus emerge and need explaining. The frontier category of eating out puts these relationships at stake, again and again, thus making it possible to compare the logic underpinning the evolution of the contours of the category in the food consumption surveys in both countries. An echo to these 'frontier' categories or practices is provided by Mark Harvey's study of 'pivotal' empirical objects – where comparison is not necessarily between countries but between transforming objects (tomatoes, genomes, biofuels, water) and the processes of change they thus comparatively chart.

13 Forms of commensality are usually thought to be distinct in different social spaces – with whom you eat and the format of the meal differ at home and outside the home. Nevertheless these distinctions are dependent on a specific conception of commensality as literally sharing the same table. Helena Tuomainen's study of modes of shared eating among Ghanaians in London shows that the circulation of cooked food links kin across the boundaries of homes. Looking at the sharing of food as the encompassing category enables her to identify how social boundaries are enacted and physical boundaries bridged in very different ways to those of the 'host' society.

14 The individuals and groups considered for comparative research can also sometimes be characterised as 'boundary' or 'frontier' groups, turned for that reason into quasi ethnographers of themselves and others. This is the case of migrants in general, whose observation of their host society and comparison with practices 'back home' can constitute an important source for the comparative analysis of foodways. This also requires that the status of these observations of oneself and others is clarified and related to the tensions experienced by these migrants – a very insightful example of which is Crenn's (2011) research with Senegalese pensioners living across France and Senegal, whom she has characterised as 'go-between'. Giada Danesi's

young respondents studying or working in one of the other countries of her study, prove to be reflective observers of their host society and of their own greater or lower readiness towards other forms of festive commensality: through this they are also testifying to their own commitment or faithfulness to the conventions for their circles 'back home'. Variations in festive commensality among young people from different countries thus emerge in the selective and contrasting appropriation of new ways.

- 15 Our own research about Anglo-French couples on both sides of the Channel relies on the peculiarities of such 'boundary' or 'frontier' positioning. Partners are both eager to embrace the other's (food)ways yet at times find themselves reluctant, almost in spite of themselves: the tension makes them particularly acute observers and 'feelers' for difference. Their reactions unveil shared dispositions for both consistency and contrast in eating and eating arrangements, but also variation in how these are expressed and organised.
- 16 In following characters whose lives cross frontiers, these studies touch upon perspectives similar to those of 'entangled' or 'connected' history in historical sciences, whereby 'the point is less to compare differences and similarities than to pay attention to relationships, reciprocal perceptions and observations, or transfers of ideas, people and goods' (Kocka, 2013). As Kocka notes, however, such approaches are less an alternative to comparisons of similarities and differences and more a complement.

Comparison: what for?

- 17 We think it important to reflect critically on whether data collected for governmental concerns and purposes is directly serviceable for social scientific comparison. This does not imply that they be discarded – indeed it is on the grounds of such concerns that data is gathered in systematic fashion, and is collected in accordance with as near as possible to identical protocols and using common categories for classification of behaviours. (We return to this issue). What, then, is comparison intended for? The purposes of the papers in this special issue fall in two main groups: some are chiefly constructed around the interplay between comparison and theory – the hope here is that theory is productive for comparison and comparison is productive for theory. Others mobilize comparison for the interrogation of entrenched categories.
- 18 In the first group, Mark Harvey's idea of stretching concepts to see what they can encompass and how they might consistently be extended to address wider (comparative) phenomena is very well made. This indicates a potential strategy for programmes of comparative research. The incorporation of natural entities (of Nature) into the interaction of politics and economics in the face of ecological threats to human societies proves timely in relation to policy but was not anticipated at the beginning of the research. This reaffirms the adage that the creative inquiry does not know in advance the answers to its questions nor the direction in which its endeavours will lead. One intriguing feature of his account is the emphasis on comparing processes which are open-ended, whose telos is unknown. Also important is his stress on the socio-genesis of contemporary problems. Overall, however, this reconstruction of an intellectual trajectory testifies to the purpose of developing conceptual frameworks in order to better understand the similarities and differences among (potentially) comparable cases and the integration of evolving processes.
- 19 In a similar key, though on a different scale, Miriam Glucksmann's study of 'consumption work' in systems of food provisioning in the UK and Taiwan is not typological. Rather, her aim is 'to problematize what is meant by "economic" activity, work and non-work, consumption, consumption work and leisure' using the concept of consumption work in the two countries.
- 20 Nina Kahma and her colleagues, for their part, developed the notion of 'eating system' in parallel with their exploration of eating patterns in four Nordic countries (Finland, Norway, Sweden and Denmark). They explore a specific relationship at the core of their notion of eating system – that between the meal format, and more specifically its 'complexity', and sociability. The notion of complexity refers to both the complexity of the meals (approached through the number of dishes) and the dishes (number of ingredients). This represents a further elaboration of the contrast between hot and cold meals employed in their earlier study (Kjaernes, 2001). As acknowledged by the authors, this indicator of complexity is not ideal;

it is primarily a measure of the number of different items consumed and might obscure other more symbolic and resource-dependent bases of variation. So, although the study interestingly highlights the relative importance of situational factors (where and when the meals are eaten) in accounting for meal complexity by contrast with socio-demographic factors, its measure through counts of items proved insufficiently differentiating for a meaningful comparison between the four countries: indeed frustration with results, and not only ‘success’, should spur further developments in the approach to ‘complexity’ in meals and dishes.

21 Our own attempt at comparative inquiry into change in eating habits of cross-national couples in a dynamic way led us to reflect on how the dynamic of practices can be conceptualised. Comparing meant asking what possibilities were afforded to eaters in different countries to face up to contradictory injunctions: practices appear shaped by tensions between different drives, and this shaping process takes a different form in different countries even though the drives are similar. Such an approach to dynamics of practices, rather than looking at variations in combinations between structural elements of practices, opens up, in principle, possibilities for linking a practice theoretical approach to political economies of food.

22 A second group of papers focuses more on the interrogation and de-construction of categories through comparison, especially where (broadly speaking) governmental and moral concerns have tended to reify them. Typical examples include the family meal and commensality.

23 Helena Tuomainen carries out her analysis of food sharing in Ghanaian families in London and in their Ghanaian past against the western norm of the shared family meal, thus highlighting the specificity of that norm and unpacking some of its conditions. As Tuomainen points out, more research would be required to draft a complete picture of commensality and the sharing of food among Ghanaians. Nevertheless, her paper already sketches out interesting contrasts between the circulation of food (cooked by one cook) and eating together (the food prepared by several cooks), and also between the private realm of kin in their homes and the public realm of the community.

24 Anne Lhuissier’s analysis of the category of ‘eating out’ is another example of deconstruction, achieved through a completely different method. She throws light on two different ways of doing government statistics, and ultimately of two different objects (and ways) of government. Elaborating speculatively on Lhuissier’s work, we venture a contrast between governing bodies vs governing numbers; food is central to the former, whereas in the latter it is one item among others.

25 Finally, and to come back to the issue of data availability, there is a tension between the need for data for comparison and the need to understand the governmental frameworks underpinning them. One way to do this is to subject categories to the kind of analysis referred to above. More immediately perhaps, we need reviews of existing sources, their *raison d’être* and rationale, so as to refer the categories used back to their underpinning logics. Mette Ranta offers such a survey of the availability of data which might be used to compare food consumption across the countries within the European Union (EU). She shows that at present there is no collected or compiled harmonized data set which could be subjected to secondary analysis which is sufficiently reliable for purposes of the types of comparative analysis dealing with the matters of central interest to anthropologists, sociologists and other disciplines in the interpretive social sciences. If one wanted to pursue further analysis at the aggregate level of the topics addressed in this edition of the journal – eating habits across the life course, adaptation of foodways by migrants, entertainment, consumption work – there would be no suitable means to do this. Nevertheless, Ranta notes that some attempts are currently underway to collect and organize data bases which are more likely to be useful to scholars with interests in the cultural aspects of eating. For certain specific or more limited purposes much valuable material is already available and Ranta’s survey indicates exactly where it would be best to look.

26 Beyond the ‘convergence/divergence dichotomy’, ‘between dynamism and variation’ and ‘comparison: what for?’: these are some of the broader interrogations and tensions running through the various papers presented here. However, as has been pointed out in a recent special issue of *Sociologie du Travail* on comparison, the field of comparative studies is ‘effervescent’:

like its coordinators (see Demazière, Giraud & Lallement, 2013), we can only hope that this special issue of *AoFood* will illuminate further some of the questions facing comparison in food practices today.

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Notes

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